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VII.—LESSING'S RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO HIS *NATHAN*
THE WISE.

The primitive purity of the early Church soon yielded to a Church hierarchy. In those early times, before the New Testament was admitted to equal canonical authority with the Old, the Church became the supreme authority and the Bible was subordinate. After the incorporation of the New Testament into the Bible, the Scriptures and the Church appear to be coördinate authority in the patristic writings of that period. During the Middle Ages the Church grew rapidly in political power and the influence of the Scriptures waned accordingly, so that Dante complains of the way in which not merely creeds and fathers but canon law and the decretals were studied instead of the gospels. It is true that pious people, ever since the days of Pentecost, had believed that "the inward spiritual facts of man's religious experience were of infinitely more value than their expression in stereotyped forms recognized by the Church," and that, too, "in such a solemn thing as the forgiveness of sin man could go to God directly without human mediation." These pious souls had found the pardon they sought, but the good majority were under the dominion of the Church, which at last degraded the meaning of "spiritual" so that it signified mere ritualistic service, and "thrust itself between God and the worshipper, and proclaimed that no man could draw near to God save through its appointed ways of approach. Confession was to be made to God through the priest; God spoke pardon only in the priest's absolution. When Luther attacked indulgences in the way he did he struck at the whole system." After the Reformation a reaction set in. New and better translations of the Bible were made, and the Word became accessible to everybody. The successors of the Reformers emphasized "the

verbal inspiration of the Scripture and its infallible authority (more) than had been done for the most part by the first Reformers, Luther and Calvin and their contemporaries, who never seemed to have sanctioned the famous *dictum* of Chillingworth, 'the Bible, and the Bible only, is the religion of the Protestants.' " The Reformers took the Holy Scriptures, because they are the divine word, and require no further supplement from tradition and custom, merely as the rule and canon of their faith. Traditions, dogmas, ordinances established by the Church, were null and void. This freedom of the religious conscience and the Holy Scriptures as the living, pure source of religion brought a rich blessing to Christians. Religion was elevated above that sphere in which mere morality and outer ordinance were the determining principles, and raised man to a new spiritual life. The real motive principle of this new life is justification by faith.

The Bible had now become the norm of faith, but who was to guide the believer in discovering its truth? Was he to be a law unto himself, or should there be a third person, or principle, who should be authority to him? Here the Reformers took two courses diametrically opposed to each other. The one party, who did not wish to trust to subjective reason, to human intellect, interpreted the truth contained in the Bible according to the public confessions and symbols of their own Church; a course not much different from that of the Roman Catholic Church, though granting greater privileges on the whole. Others, without regard to the confessions of faith in their own particular churches, made their own explanation of the Scriptures according to the *dictum* of their own subjective reason, thus endangering the truth as a whole, the real body of religious faith. For only when there is some generally recognized principle which will enable us to determine what truth the Scriptures teach, and to distinguish the true from the false, can the freedom demanded by the Reformers, independent of every mere outer authority, be brought into unison with the objective divine truth.

That truth, however, which gave such an impetus to the religious conscience of the Reformers, was wholly lost, or at least much weakened, at the time when they settled the Lutheran doctrines in the Form of Concord (1577). "His successors in the leadership of the Protestant movement eliminated all mystical elements out of their theology, and made Lutheranism a system of dry and rigid dogmatics. They gave an excessive value to doctrinal soundness, and underrated the piety of the emotions. Hence a reaction against dogmatism, of which John Arndt and Jacob Spener were moderate representatives, while Jacob Boehme and Gottfried Arnold were violent and extreme." This dogmatism was naturally not at all pleasing to the more devout, and we find mysticism rapidly gaining ground. "In its essential meaning, it is the aspiration to immediate and direct fellowship of the human spirit with God, without the intervention of form, institutions, doctrinal systems, or even intelligent ideas. It dwells on feeling, emotion, ecstasy, as the shortest way to the divine fellowship, and teaches the denial of our wills, even in things innocent, as the true preliminary to this. In theology it finds its antithesis in 'theocracy,' which brings the spirit into divine relations through institutions and laws, and in 'dogmatism,' which seeks to know God by the way of the intellect. In the New Testament we find all three elements present, as we find them also in every adequate presentation of Christianity. But in John's writings we have the element the mystics especially valued. And from his time the succession of thinkers of this type is never broken in the history of Christian theology." Later it "blended Christian teaching with the speculations of the Neoplatonist philosophy, teaching that the highest blessedness is found in the fellowship with the Divine Unity, and this is attainable by passing through the three stages of purification, illumination, and union." But mysticism was too deep for the unspeculative mind, and soon shaded off into Pietism. The latter brought back the subjective introspection which is truly the living principle of the

religious life. The origin of the pietistic movement was in the defects of the Lutheran Church "which in the 17th century had become a creed-bound theological and sacramentarian institution which orthodox theologians ruled with almost the absolutism of the papacy. Correctness of creed had taken the place of deep religious feeling and purity of life. Christian faith had been dismissed from its seat in the heart, where Luther had placed it, to the cold region of the intellect. The dogmatic formularies of the Lutheran Church had usurped the position which Luther himself had assigned to the Bible alone, and, as a consequence, they only were studied and preached, while the Bible was neglected in the family, the study, the pulpit and the university." Thus the Church had again become a despotic hierarchy. Jacob Spener was at the head of the movement which proposed a return to the Bible and to a more practical and primitive Christianity.

Pietism, which strove to give pious feeling its due rights, found its greatest opposition in the dominant orthodoxy of the day. But the real attack on the Lutheran faith came from a quarter hitherto little heeded, and with weapons which had not been used for a long time. It threatened to subvert the entire fabric. Reason in religion was the mighty force which now came to the front and began that destructive Biblical criticism which is still raging. The authority which the Reformers, when contesting the infallibility of the Church, had placed in the Holy Scriptures, had yielded to that criticism which subjected the Bible to the same tests as were applied to classic authors. The conscience became indifferent to religion, and the decision in regard to truth was left to subjective caprice, a very unsafe guide. Soon the spirit of reason in religion appeared on the field of philosophy and caused an actual breach between the faith of the Church and the pretended pure ideal of reason. As early as the sixteenth century a movement had begun which was destined to lead to this result. "Faustus Socinus, an Italian theologian of the sixteenth century, denied the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the

personality of the Devil, the native and total depravity of man, the vicarious atonement, and the eternity of future punishment." In the last decade of the same century lived Descartes (1596-1650), and in the following century Spinoza (1632-1677), Bayle (1647-1706), Leibnitz (1646-1716), Thomasius (1655-1728), Wolff (1679-1754), all of whom had contributed by their philosophies to inaugurate the so-called Age of Enlightenment. The Socinians were followed by the English Deists, or Free-thinkers, as they were usually called. In England the germ of this wide-spread intellectual revolution first came to maturity. "By the great discoveries of Newton, and the completely conceivable experimental philosophy of Locke, new life was awakened. The fall of the Stuarts and the excellent constitution with that religion of reason called Deism helped the new era." The Deists appeared in England toward the end of the seventeenth century, then spread to France and finally to Germany. They "declared that those ideas only were essential which were found in the so-called natural theology, forming a striking contrast to those doctrines of the straight-out Lutherans." Reason became the norm by which the truth of revelation was to be judged.

Spinoza contested inspiration: miracles and prophecies fell away. Whoever found Spinoza's decisive way too harsh turned to the great dictionary of Bayle and the writings of Leclerc, Basnage, Bernard. Belief became doubt, doubt rationalism. The bonds of the narrow point of view were rent asunder by the free intellect of a general civilization. Freedom of conscience and religious tolerance became the highest moral demand.

Leibnitz may justly be considered the father of German philosophy, as he is among the first of the German philosophers who created for himself a comprehensive philosophical conception of the world. But we can give the best summary of him with Wolff.

Two men appear in Germany at this time as forerunners of Lessing, Christian Thomasius, and Christian Wolff, both

already mentioned above. We must necessarily consider their influence in order to follow understandingly the religious discussions of our author. Thomasius was a pioneer and helped to prepare the way for reforms in philosophy, law, literature, social life and theology. He had a faculty for bringing the divine and human sciences into close and living contact with every-day life. He took a rational, common-sense point of view of everything and has been well called "the personified spirit of illuminationism." He helped to free politics and jurisprudence from the control of theology and fought bravely and consistently for freedom of thought and speech on religious matters. "In theology he was not a naturalist or deist, but a believer in the necessity of a revealed religion for salvation. He felt strongly the influence of the Pietists at times, particularly Spener, and there was a mystic vein in his thought ; but other elements of his nature were too powerful to allow him to attach himself finally to that party." He was the leader of the school of eclecticism and sought to cull the best from sensualism, idealism, skepticism and mysticism, and rose above tradition and authority. Such a man could not but have a strong influence in clearing up the religious sky of its dogmatic and skeptical positivism. Christian Wolff was a philosopher of the Leibnitzian school and held undisputed sway in Germany till he was displaced by Kant. He modified, methodized, and reduced to dogmatic form the thoughts of the great Leibnitz, but watered and weakened them in the process. His real merits are "mainly his comprehensive view of philosophy, as embracing in its survey the whole field of human knowledge, his insistence everywhere on clear and methodic exposition, and his confidence in the power of reason to reduce all subjects to this form. . . . Wolff's moral principle was the realization of human perfection." The German theological rationalism found its chief supporters in Leibnitz and Wolff, but was also enriched by the English Deists and Moralists, though in Germany we do not find that hard skepticism of the English freethinkers, nor the flippant

wit and mockery of the French. Here there was an effort on the part of German scholarship to test thoroughly the underlying principles of the various beliefs, sift the good from the bad, and elevate the moral standard. The clear and sensible doctrine of morality which was proclaimed by the rationalists and the moral philosophers spread good morals, freedom of thought and religious tolerance. Wolff himself only held to the merely formal principle; besides the revealed religion, which was only for belief, there was a natural religion which was to be demonstrated. This natural religion, or religion of reason, had of course the precedence over the revealed. Such thinkers as H. R. Reimarus and later J. A. Eberhard, who passed for the best disciples of Wolff, sought to bring the formal rational principle of their own philosophy into unison with the doctrine of the real Deists, though without entire success. These deistic doctrines were at first friendly to the new theological movement of the day which the Age of Enlightenment had caused. The philosophy of Wolff had been instrumental in bringing this about, as many of the theologians, who believed that the real orthodox faith harmonized with Wolff's philosophy, turned to this and confidently asserted that the union between reason and revelation had been sealed forever. "Faith was called reason strengthened by miracles and signs, and reason was reasoning faith." But it must not be supposed that this new movement was entirely successful in suppressing the adherents of the old faith. This was not accomplished till the last two decades of the century, when Kant's philosophy transformed the essential doctrines of the Christian belief into general expressions of morality; however, the conflict in which Lessing took such an important part was advanced to another stadium by Kant's Philosophy of Reason. The representatives of orthodoxy, who insisted upon the authority of the Bible and the symbols and who also claimed the power of the temporal authorities for themselves, strove with all the means at their command to overthrow the enemy who was

threatening to overthrow the very foundation of the present theological system.

Among all those zealous for the purity of the orthodox faith none was more zealous than Pastor J. M. Goeze in Hamburg, who won the name of Zion's Sentinel. Thoroughly impressed with the truth of his faith, endowed with learning and good reason, he possessed in a certain sphere the right powers of observation and judgment. But on the other hand he was not without officiousness and the controversial spirit, and was not really able to grasp, where it was necessary, the inner reason on which religious knowledge rests, nor to rise to a scientific point of view. The more Goeze accomplished on this field, the more zealous he became and sought out and pursued pretended heresies so eagerly as to remind one of the intolerance so prevalent in the earlier Catholic Church. He was too good-hearted to have heretics burned, but he did insist on retraction. And this was evidently the spirit of the persecutions which the strict Churchmen carried on against those differing from them, even using the secular power to enforce their injunctions.

Early in life Lessing showed a deep interest in everything pertaining to the religious nature of man. In the fragment entitled *Thoughts on the Moravians*, composed in 1750 though first published in his literary remains, we see him seeking to vindicate for religion, whose religious truth had often been adulterated by foreign elements, that sphere which would forever make it independent of the opinions, subtleties and sophisms of reason. There he upheld poverty of knowledge over against arrogance of hollow thinking. His so-called *Vindications* were probably written in Wittenberg in 1754; viz., Vindication of Horace, Cardanus, Inepti Religiosi, and Cochlaeus. Of these that of Cardanus alone throws light upon our special topic. Cardanus had represented in his *de subtilitate* (1552) the four religions of the world: Heathendom, Judaism, Christianity, and Islamism in a dialogue in which each representative defended his own belief and sought to refute the others, and was accused of showing indifference as

to which was victor in the controversy. Lessing undertook his defence and easily proved that Cardanus really deserved the very opposite reproach of favoring Christianity because he had given to the Christian the strongest, to his opponents the weakest arguments. The Jew and the Mussulman, said Lessing, could have defended themselves against the unjust attacks of the Christian far better than Cardanus let them. Then Lessing took up the cause of the Jew and Mussulman and showed how both could and should have answered. In the defence of the Mussulman he used the arguments of the Deists to prove the excellence of his religion over the Christian. This religious feature reminds us vividly of *Nathan* and perhaps Danzel is not very wrong when he says that Lessing's first thought of *Nathan* arose here. While secretary to general Tauenzien (1760-1765), Lessing not only busied himself with the profound doctrines of Spinoza and Leibnitz, but also began his real study of the Church fathers. He acquired such accurate knowledge of these that while in Hamburg Pastor Goeze found pleasure in his intercourse and passed pleasant and instructive hours with him. Great as he was as dramaturgist and dramatic poet he proved himself equally at home in this seemingly distant field of knowledge.

What, then, was Lessing's position on the religious questions of the day? A difficult problem to solve. He certainly was not a strict orthodox and yet he did not wholly reject orthodoxy and pass over to the so-called school of neology which seemed to wish to make *tabula rasa* with the past and leave the future to wild speculation. Lessing preferred to leave the old, bad as it was, till something better could be found to take its place. The trend of Lessing's thoughts was on the side of the movement of Enlightenment. But he was by nature an investigator and needed to examine everything carefully and to consider thoroughly every possible phase of a question before he decided. In his opinion the final object of religion was not absolute salvation, no matter how, but salvation through enlightenment, for enlightenment to him meant salvation. But the bent of

his mind was toward historical researches which distinguished him from the popular philosophers of the day. This led him to his favorite idea of a graded and regular historical development of the religious nature of man. He hated dogmatism of whatever kind, whether of old tradition, of authoritative faith, or the dogmatism of Enlightenment itself, and fought it wherever he found it (cf. Zeller, *Deutsche Philosophie*, p. 290 ff.). That combination of philosophy and religion so popular in his day he opposed. He regretted that the natural partition between the two had been torn down; for "under the pretext of making us reasonable Christians they make us most unreasonable philosophers."

His controversy with Goeze gave him the desired opportunity to "explain and establish more fully his idea of religion and Christianity." He there makes the true distinction between religion *per se* and the form in which it is clothed at any definite time and by any definite sect. Whether religion with him means anything more than mere morality still remains an unsolved problem. He certainly understood the distinction between the religion of Christ and the Christian religion, that is, the religion of piety and love of mankind and the worship of Christ as a supernatural being. This is the central thought of the *Nathan*. "The *Nathan* is the poetic glorification of the idea which considers the human side of the question of more importance than the positive, the moral more important than the dogmatic, which judges man not by what he believes, but by what he is" (Zeller, l. c., 304 ff.). Lessing did not accept the orthodox doctrines of faith without questioning them; he was too independent for that. He certainly showed that he was a thinker on theological questions who understood the speculative depth inherent in the dogmas of Christianity and who took the field against the Socinians and Deists who ignored that depth. And yet, though often a defender of Lutheran orthodoxy, the time came when Lessing was considered its one great opponent, and with much justice, though he was forced into this attitude against his own wish and in self-defence.

It is quite probable that while in Hamburg Lessing made the acquaintance of the writings of Professor H. S. Reimarus (1768 †), the rationalist mentioned above, for he was well acquainted with the children of the professor, and undoubtedly received a copy of the manuscript from them. Under the title of *Fragments from an Unknown* he published parts of this manuscript while at Wolfenbüttel in his *Contributions to History and Literature*. Their publication was accompanied by Lessing's notes in which he called attention to the weakness of the author's arguments and often suggested how they could best be answered. These fragments excited but little interest at first and it was one of those peculiar accidents, which always occur so opportunely to help on a good cause, that drew public attention to them. The Hamburg Pastor Goeze was then engaged in writing the history of the Low Saxon Bibles and had written to Lessing to collate a Bible found in the library for a certain passage. Lessing was then in great anxiety about the life of his wife who lay at the point of death, and either neglected or forgot to attend to the matter. This won him the bitter enmity of Goeze who considered himself misused. Goeze now took up the subject of the fragments with fanatical rage and declared Lessing's running comments on them to be a hostile attack upon the Christian religion. When outdone by Lessing in this literary passage at arms he resorted to the Consistory at Brunswick. The fragments were confiscated and Lessing strictly forbidden for the future to publish anything on religious matters, either at home or abroad, either with or without his name, unless with the express sanction of the government. Lessing was not intimidated, and in 1776 he directed another scathing article at his foe entitled *Necessary Answer to an Unnecessary Question*. It was the last word of the whole controversy. The affair thus took a different turn from that which Lessing had at first thought to give it. His reason for publishing the fragments was in the interest of truth, not as an attack on the Bible and the Christian religion. Believing that the truth could not be

enjoyed best in idle rest, but in the activity of one's own mind, he had wished to awaken the theologians from their dangerous lethargy and set them to testing the truth once more. He now found himself obliged to shake the very foundations of the Lutheran-orthodox system and to call forth a battle between the spirit and the letter which has been left to us as an inheritance, though the weightiest truths have again been confirmed and made triumphant.

Lessing's Anti-Goeze writings which this controversy called forth have ever been admired for their wit and brilliancy. The genius of this great critic is here shown in its full power. If the wit, even where it plays with the person of Goeze, who was by no means to be despised, produces a beneficent, even an elevating feeling in us, the reason of this elevation can only be found in the fact that it is the force of the truth by which we feel ourselves imperceptibly drawn on. His first and greatest contributions are his *Axiomata*, of which the first reads thus: "The letter is not the spirit, and the Bible is not religion. The Bible contains more than belongs to religion, and it is a mere hypothesis that the Bible is equally infallible in this more." Lessing thus distinguishes between the spirit, or the absolute principle from which religion proceeds, and the Holy Scriptures, that document in which religion is contained, but in which more appears than belongs to religion. He does not deny, therefore, that that part of the Bible which contains real religious principles was inspired by the Holy Ghost. Consequently objections to the letter and the Bible are not likewise objections to the spirit and religion. His second axiom runs thus: "Religion also existed before the Bible. Christianity existed before the evangelists and apostles wrote. Some time passed before the first of these wrote, and a very considerable time before the whole canon was produced. However much we may depend on these writings, the whole truth of the Christian religion cannot possibly rest upon them. If there was indeed a period in which it had already taken possession of so many souls, and in which assuredly no letter

of that which has come to us was written, it must be possible that all that the evangelists and apostles wrote was lost and yet the religion taught by them maintained itself." Lessing could easily prove that the teaching of the first apostles was oral and that tradition was more important than the Scriptures, as his study of the Church fathers had been extensive. The *regula fidei* existed before any book of the New Testament and it became the test of the writings of the apostles by which the present choice was made, and many other epistles, though bearing the names of apostles, were rejected. He maintained that it was not possible to show that the apostles and evangelists wrote their works for the express purpose of having the Christian religion completely and wholly deduced and proved by them. Ages passed before the Scriptures acquired any authority and without the *regula fidei* it would be impossible to prove the present Christian religion. This was playing into the hands of the Catholics, but whether intentionally or rather to point out a real defect of the Protestant doctrines is left ambiguous; it is certainly the weighty point in the contest. Lessing feared that he might be misunderstood and therefore sought to forestall hostile criticisms in his third axiom where he says: "Religion is not true because the evangelists and apostles taught it, but they taught it because it is true. From its inner truth the written traditions must be explained and all written traditions can give it no inner truth when it has none." In other words religion does not receive its truth from those who proclaim it, nor does the document in which it is contained lend it a truth it does not possess itself. Religion, then, is independent of the Bible.

The enunciation of this principle caused great discontent among those who would not see any difference between religion *par excellence* and the Bible, its promulgator. Our historical knowledge of revealed religion comes to us immediately from the Bible, but the real knowledge of truth is to be found in independent inner signs which are no more dependent on the Bible than the truth of a geometrical problem is dependent on

the book in which it is found. Lessing distinguishes in the Bible the spirit from the letter, the eternal from the temporal. The truth of religion is recognized from itself, and the inner truth is the only test of the so-called hermeneutic truth which only the spirit *κατ' ἐξοχὴν*, the spirit out of which the truth contained in the Bible came (not the Holy Spirit, but the one receiving the inner witness of the Holy Spirit) can be declared absolute authority, the last instance, to decide in matters of religious belief. How the Holy Spirit, working in unison with the active thought or real reason in us offers testimony of the truth in the self-consciousness of man, Lessing did not discuss.

Lessing's contemporaries were not able to comprehend nor appreciate fully the truth which forms the basis of his polemic against his opponents, nor did its full import appear in his *Axiomata* or his *Anti-Goeze*. The politico-social conditions of that age also received his attention, in which sphere he fought the powers of prejudice in his *Ernst and Falk, or Dialogues for Freemasons*. The brilliant and well-read French writers had subjected the burgher constitutions and the social life of their times to the severest criticism, and laid bare the dark sides of the age without reserve. J. J. Rousseau had condemned the civilized state and praised the simple condition of primitive nature. Lessing was thoroughly opposed to this idea of a primitive state as the best in the social order, and considered "the ideal society one in which there would be no government." "A society of developed men who stand in no need of law because they have acquired absolute self-control: that was the end to which Lessing looked forward as the highest point mankind could reach." But this he knew could not then, perhaps, never be attained, and Falk says in one dialogue that "in civil society alone can human reason be cultivated." He was also opposed to that tendency in ancient Greek life which sacrificed the individual to the state, the belief that the welfare of the state is the end, that of the individual the means: "States unite men, that through and in

this union every individual may the better and more surely enjoy his share of welfare. The total of the welfare of its members is the welfare of the state; besides this there is none. Every other kind of welfare of the state, whereby individuals suffer and must suffer, is a cloak for tyranny." But just what the duties of a state are to its individual members Lessing does not tell us. He dwells on some of the evils that are connected with the state as it now is, and urged the cosmopolitan and humanitarian idea with his usual vigor. He advocated no single political constitution which he considered the very best, for he knew that all nations were not equally advanced nor equally suited for the same constitution. There should be diversity to suit the diversified interests of the various nations, but all should strive to draw nearer that standard where government will not be necessary. The unavoidable evils which accompany the social life we must bear as well as possible, just as we bear the smoke of the fire which gives us warmth; but we may build chimneys, if we will. "He does not deny the distinctions that exist, he does not pretend that so long as there are states they can be done away with, but he looks them in the face, and finds that their importance is only in name. What does it matter, he virtually asks, that a man is a prince or cobbler, an Englishman or a Russian, a Christian or a Mohammedan? He is still a man, and his manhood are his true greatness and dignity. This is the very kernel of the most vital truth of democracy; and because of it Lessing may be claimed as, in temper and character, one of the first and most genuine of modern democrats" (Sime II, pp. 293-4). In these five dialogues we see that Lessing takes a cosmopolitan view of the social problem and rises above all nationality; his object is a plea for humanitarianism in its broadest sense, and that spirit of charity which admits no undue respect for rank and no narrow patriotism. Whether attainable or not in this present world, constituted as it is, it is certainly worth striving for.

Closely connected with these dialogues is the essay on the *Education of the Human Race*, in which Lessing starts out with the proposition that "what Education is to the individual man, Revelation is to the Human Race. Education is Revelation which comes to the individual man. Revelation is Education which has come to the Human Race, and is still coming." He divides God's Revelation to man into three stages: The first is that of the Israelites under the Old Dispensation, the lowest stage, where perceptible punishment and rewards are necessary. Fear of temporal punishment prevented the evil from breaking out in man. Christianity was the second stage, the spiritual religion. Christ became the teacher of the immortality of the soul and thus another true future life gained an influence upon the acts of men. "The inner purity of the heart to be recommended for another life was reserved for Christ alone." "These writings (of the New Testament) have for seventeen hundred years enlightened human reason more than all other books, if only by the light which human reason has given to them." But as the human race outgrew the Old Dispensation it will also outgrow the New. The third stage, or the stage of "the new, eternal gospel, which is promised in the elementary books of the New Testament, will surely come." This is the time of perfection, "when man, the more convinced his reason feels of the ever better future, will indeed not have to borrow motives for his actions from this future, since he will do the good because it is good, not because arbitrary rewards have been promised which should merely fix and strengthen the fickle look in order to teach the inner, better rewards of the same."

So nearly related are these two writings that we must thoroughly investigate this new gospel before we can completely understand the politico-social and religious views of our author. In the *Education of the Human Race* Lessing maintains that the inducement to do good for the professing Christian is not so much the pure love of the good as rather the prospect of eternal happiness, which, according to Chris-

tian doctrines, is the consequence of virtue. A certain eudemonistic element, therefore, will still cling to the common Christian doctrine, and it would only be reserved for the religion of the future to display virtue in its complete purity without any mixture of foreign elements. But the education of the human race indicates that Christianity already contains the truth, and that the shell in which it is often hidden will be completely broken, and the part which has hitherto been a secret will be revealed. For this reason historical Christianity holds the same relation to the New Gospel as the truth, which is still in a certain measure a mystery, holds to the absolute knowledge of the truth. The development of real truth to the truth of reason is absolutely necessary to the human race, if it is to make proper progress to the point of loving virtue for itself. For, as it is reason which thinks the revealed truths and gradually recognizes them, so it is reason also that produces that purity of heart by means of which we are made capable of loving virtue for itself. Not till the time when men recognize the truth of religion, and have given themselves wholly up to the truth with the heart freed from every emotion of eudemonism, have they arrived at that grade of development where they may expect the New Gospel. This third age will come, of that our author has no doubt. When men, the entire race as well as individuals, have attained to that point where they are capable of ruling themselves then there will be a new era for social life and the state. Then order would exist without government. The age in which men love virtue for its own sake is the same age as that in which the order of the social world will exist without government. Lessing, therefore, maintains that no positive religion has any right to claim supremacy. Particular races and particular times must have a religion suited to them and their time, which must change as they outgrow it, or as the times change. There is constant growth, constant advance, no permanency in the sense of stagnation or lack of growth. In this light no nation, no person, has the right to claim that his

religion is the only true religion ; nor can he claim his to be superior on the plea of special revelation, but only as having more of the divine nature in it. In other words, it must be less mixt with elements foreign to the true nature of religion and to God in order to be superior. This is the real basis of that "tolerance of which Nathan and Saladin are the ideal representatives. If a man believes that he possesses a truth without which the race must perish, it is impossible for him to look with calmness on opposing faiths. Let him become convinced that there is no truth essential to mankind to which all have not equal access, and it will seem strange to him that anyone should wish to restrain the free intellectual impulses of his fellows" (Sime II, pp. 271-2).

But if "no historical religion is absolute, each has a relative worth." Every positive religion (Christianity, Judaism, or other) has been beneficial to its age and believers. Lessing did not join those skeptics who were attempting to overthrow the Church and all religious belief, but he had the courage to proclaim to these iconoclasts that "they misunderstood the religion they assailed." It had achieved great good for the human race and would continue its work. "Why," he asks, "will we not rather recognize in positive religions the direction in which alone the human understanding has been able to develop itself in various places, and may yet further develop itself, than either smile or scowl at either of them? Nothing in the best of worlds deserves this our anger, this our dislike, and only our religion shall be supposed to deserve it? God has had his hand in everything, but has had nothing to do with our errors?" "These simple words sounded the doom of the only way in which it has yet occurred to the free-thinking eighteenth century to look upon religions with which it did not agree. They asserted once for all the principle that it is not by trickery that the lives of vast masses of men are controlled from generation to generation" (ibid.)

In his *Nathan* Lessing has attempted to idealize these two principles that no positive religion has an absolute value,

though having a relative one, and that there is a law of progress in human history, whether civil or religious. Does his drama reach his high ideal of religion, his noble ideal of the state, his exalted ideal of life? Or is it rather only a complement, only another example, another superior or inferior view of the discussion into which he had been drawn? To answer these questions intelligently we must subject this his drama to a critical examination.

In the Goeze controversy Lessing had violated the commands of those over him and felt that he might lose his position as librarian of Wolfenbüttel; moreover he wished to put in imperishable and popular form those ideas which the discussion had brought to light. Therefore he had conceived the idea of preparing the *Nathan* for publication and selling it on subscription. The first definite notice we find of the play is in a letter to his brother, dated August 11th, 1778, in which he says: "Many years ago I once sketched a play, the plot of which bears a kind of analogy to my present controversy, of which I did not then even dream. . . . If you and Moses (Mendelssohn) wish to know it, you may turn to the *Decamerone* of Boccaccio, Giorn. I., Nov. III., Melchisedech, Giudeo. I think I have invented a very interesting episode to it, so that all will read well and I shall certainly play the theologians a greater joke than with ten more fragments." In another letter he gives the additional information that "it will be anything but a satirical piece in order to leave the battle-field with sarcastic laughter. It will be as pathetic a piece as I have ever written and Mr. Moses (Mendelssohn) has judged correctly that mockery and laughter would not be in harmony with the note I struck in my last paper [*Necessary Answer*, etc.] (which you will also find vibrating in this afterpiece), unless I wished to give up the whole controversy. But I do not yet have the least desire to abandon it, and he (Moses) shall indeed see that I am not going to injure my own cause by this dramatic digression." On another occasion he adds: "My piece has nothing to do with our present blackcoats (clericals), and I will

not block the way for its final appearance on the theatre, if a hundred years must first pass. The theologians of all revealed religions will indeed silently curse it, but they will be careful not to take sides against it openly."

However different the three religions are, according to the measure of their revelation, they are still in so far genuine that they come from God and originate in God who adapts his love to the strength of mankind in granting them the Mosaic and Muhammedan religions as those of the law and the Christian as that of freedom. By the religion of the law men become only servants, by the religion of love they become free, become the children of God and heirs of his kingdom. But God did not give the law to develop the servitude of men; the law is to be the educator that leads to Christ. When the natural man strives to rise above the law given him by the paternal love for his instruction and development, when he loves the law, understands its object and purport, then it ceases to be a law to him, he no longer feels it as a fetter, and only then is he capable of bearing true freedom; then perfection will come and patchwork will cease. We see this in the centurion of Capernium, in Nicodemus, in Nathanael the Israelite without guile, in the Samaritan, in Cornelius the centurion, who are all above the law and are no longer fettered by it. One still under the law can grow above the law, and Jew and Muhammedan can be better than their law requires of them; but they then cease to that extent to be Jew and Muhammedan that they grow into a higher order of discipline, into freedom. The Christian always fails to reach the demands of his doctrine, can never get to its highest stage of perfection, can never rise above its great truths. These embrace mankind, that universal development possible to man, while the religions of the law exclude mankind from the universality of this symmetrical development, give him a narrow and contracted education. The soul of our drama, the leading thought in it, is that piety of the heart, justice and love first impart the genuine consecration to the confession of the definite, positive faith.

This is the true principle of religion, this is the principle which Lessing wished to proclaim in his drama. We may here, indeed, pertinently ask which of the different forms of faith conforms more nearly to this true religious ideal. For this question becomes the pivotal question of the drama, and is answered, or rather its answer is attempted, in the parable of the three rings. For true religion possesses the power of making one's self well-pleasing to God and man. Religion is thus a force, and its effectiveness depends upon certain conditions; this effectiveness is, under certain circumstances, paralyzed by the resistance which it meets. Therefore, religion does not produce its true effect with everyone, but requires one condition, namely, faith or confidence, and only he who possesses this faith, this confidence, can make himself well-pleasing to God and man. The power of religion is not mechanical, but dynamical, and requires co-operation on the part of man, an inner activity of its possessor. It requires our coöperation in a twofold manner, in our relation to God and in our relation to man,—resignation to God and love to our neighbor. This is the marrow of religion and is common to all religions. They differ only in degree and only in the way in which they demand both of us. This criterion would decide the relation of the religions to one another. And this appears to be the question discussed in the *Nathan*, but only appears so. For we could not make a greater mistake than to believe that Lessing wished to compare in *Nathan* Islamism, Judaism, and Christianity and judge the three religions according to their respective merits. The very fact that Saladin is a Muhammedan, Nathan a Jew, and the Patriarch a Christian, but neither of them a true representative of his religion, contradicts this view. There is a good reason why Lessing makes the Patriarch a Christian and Nathan a Jew, as we shall see later on; it would also be folly to think that Lessing intended to make Christianity inferior to Islamism and Judaism. The heathen show their self-abnegation before God by sacrifice; the Jews by sacrifice and that inner feeling which manifests itself in

the recognition of sin and atonement ; the Christian by giving the whole heart to God, and by the regenerating process which follows this. Islamism is in this respect nearly related to Christianity, but possesses a fatalistic feature which bends the will of man to a higher will, but does not set it to work. Our relations to God determine our relations to man. All religions presuppose a moral relation of man to man, but members of the different religions are at different stages of the religious growth. Judaism did not extend the love of neighbor beyond its national boundary, and prayed for the destruction of its enemies. Islamism extended its neighborly love to all the races of its confession and put the others to fire and sword. Christianity broke down the barriers and brought true humanity into the world, and extended the love of neighbor to the love of mankind in general. The gospel of Christian love is taught in the parable of the good Samaritan and is found in the words of Christ : " Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you ; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven ; for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust " (Mt. 5, 44-45). This unegoistic, disinterested love proceeding from the resignation to God forms the kernel of Christianity ; we see that Lessing acknowledges this as the vital essence of the Christian religion in his beautiful monogram : *The Testament of John*, who repeated constantly to his disciples the words " Little children, love ye one another," and when asked why, answered, " because it is the Lord's command and because when ye do that alone, ye do all."

But the growth of this religion of love may be so checked in the spiritual life of man that scarcely any trace of it shall appear, while, on the other hand, the religion of law may, under proper circumstances, produce the most disinterested love. Thus we have the Patriarch who is all the more despicable for knowing the command of love and disregard-

ing it, yet we see Nathan, in spite of the great obstacles which birth, education and environment laid upon him, crossing the narrow boundaries of his own faith and arriving at the genuine religion of love. It is not a comparison of two religions but of two men. For religion is not an outer garment, but a living, animating principle which makes its possessor well-pleasing to God and man. And yet every religion which does not confine itself to one individual but is to take root in a nation must be expressed in a certain form of divine service, in certain customs and rites. General ideas can exist as little as bodiless spirits. Without a body the spirit vanishes, without confession religion becomes a mere effusive display of sentiment, a mere empty abstraction. Every nation has its peculiar form of religion. Only when a religion is adapted to the nation which possesses it can it fulfil its mission and educate the people to true religion. Sometimes the mere outward form covers up the real kernel of religion, but as long as the real kernel is there it has some vitalizing power. True tolerance is quite opposed to mere indifference and proceeds from a firm conviction of the truth of one's own faith; it consists in the fact that we recognize in others the moral principle of their convictions and the historical right of certain symbols and rites. But he who thinks that the true essence of religion inheres in these symbols and rites alone will be just as intolerant as he who denies their origin, their significance, and their justification. Lessing cannot therefore be justly reproached with having made Christianity inferior to Islamism and Judaism, nor does any blame attach to him for having left it undecided which of the three religions is in possession of the true ring. "By their fruits ye shall know them," and has he not made it evident in his *Education of the Human Race* and other writings which of the three he considers highest? And do we not know which produces the best fruits? Let modern civilization answer those who still doubt. Although it is Christianity in which the spirit of Christ reveals the truths

of God most perfectly, it is not true of all individuals in it, and no one has the right to draw conclusions about the essence of Christianity from isolated examples. For there is a vast difference between the real, vivifying power of the gospel and sporadic distortions produced by crippled, misshapen growth ; between the truth of an idea itself and individual appearances of the same ; between its effect in universal history and its subjective existence in the souls of individual men.

But why, we may justly ask, did Lessing make a Jew (Nathan), a Saracen (Saladin), the representatives of his higher religion, and make of the Patriarch a true pattern of priestly arrogance and all that is most abhorrent in human nature ? It has been well answered that Lessing "wished to preach to the Christians, wished to make them conscious of the foolishness and badness of their Christian views and shame them ; for this purpose distortions from their own faith and noble examples from the non-christian world served him better. For Christ himself held the Good Samaritan as an example to the hard-hearted Pharisees and stiff-necked scribes ; but he did not wish to place Samaritanism above Judaism for all that." We repeat that Lessing did not choose the persons of his drama as representatives of their special religions. For if the Christians of the drama are to represent Christianity, then the Jews and Muhammedans must likewise represent their religions. But neither Nathan nor Saladin, nor Sittah, nor Al Hafi represents at all his religion, but one is forced to believe that Lessing had just the opposite in view in sketching their characters and actions. For he has either completely suppressed, or at least weakened and placed in the background, the peculiar, innate marks of different faiths by the compensating power of their religion of humanity and reason. No one would be able to extract the true doctrine of Christ from the characters and acts of the Patriarch, of Daja, of the Templar, of the Cloister-brother. The only reason which induced Lessing to take his best characters from other faiths and to make the Christians

the worst is the lesson he wished to teach. He wished to "hold the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own features, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." And all for the instruction of the Christians. The negative side of the lesson is to rebuke those who put the letter above the spirit, which results in arrogance, hypocrisy, intolerance, and fanatical persecutions. This was the answer to Goeze and his clan and was the continuation of his controversy by which he hoped to defeat his opponents. Therefore he could not take his dramatic characters in which he intended to show the distortions of the Christian religion from among the Jews and Muhammedans, but must choose them from among the Christians. For his drama was intended for effect upon Christians, as he had his motive from them. Had Lessing been a Jew or Mussulman and wished to give them a lesson, he would have chosen a Christian for his model character.

But the real, deep, underlying reason for choosing a Jew as model, the positive side of Lessing's idea, lies in the fact that the best criterion of strength and skill in a warrior is the degree of strength and skill shown by his opponent over whom he wins the victory. None of the three religions under discussion offers such a contrast with the idea of the Nathan as the Jewish; therefore none of them makes it so difficult for its professor to realize this idea and so interweave it into his character as to make it a living principle of life as the Jewish; none but the Jewish offers so many obstacles for overcoming contradictory errors and vices. The belief in Jehovah as the zealous, angry God of punishment, rather nourishes hate than the common love of mankind; the belief in Jehovah and in the Jewish nation as his chosen people leads to national and religious arrogance; to contempt for the Gentiles; it obstructs, or at least renders difficult, the germination of the idea of humanitarianism and cosmopolitanism. The history of the Jews confirms this statement. Even the Templar, who had risen above nationality and positive religion, cherishes such prejudice against the Jews that at

first he will have nothing to do with Recha and Nathan: "A Jew's a Jew, and I am rude and bearish." The power of reason and love is all the more magnificent when it triumphs over such prejudices; here is the profound reason why Nathan, who so far surpassed all other characters in goodness and wisdom, is made the principal character of the drama. We must not look for his prototype either in the spirit of the time, which indeed in its tendency to enlightenment was favorable to the Jews, nor in the personal friendship of Lessing with Moses Mendelssohn, who himself says of Nathan: "After the appearance of Nathan the cabal whispered into the ear of every friend and acquaintance that Lessing had abused Christianity, though he has only ventured to reproach some Christians and at most Christianity. In very truth, however, his Nathan, as we must confess, redounds to the honor of Christianity. Upon what high plane of enlightenment and civilization must a people be in which a man can rise to this height of sentiment, can educate himself to this excellent knowledge of divine and human things. At least posterity must think so, it seems to me; but Lessing's contemporaries did not think so." Perhaps Spielhagen (*Faust und Nathan*, p. 17) is not so far wrong when he says: "In *Faust* the riddle (of life) is given up, in *Nathan* it is solved." And page 25 he adds: "*Faust* is the tragedy of universal pain, *Nathan* the Song of Songs of reconciliation. *Faust* is chaos, *Nathan* is the Iris-bow which brightly spans the abyss, a sign of comforting promise." It is safe to assume that the *Nathan* represents Lessing's third stage in the *Education of the Human Race*, the period of "Peace on earth and good will to men," the reign of universal peace where men shall do right because it is right and govern themselves without law or rulers as each one will prefer another's interest to his own.

The setting of Lessing's conception of a perfect religion is the tale of the three rings, to which we now turn our attention. In the times of the crusades the belief obtained to a considerable extent that Christians, Jews and heathen all serve one

God, or, as some stated it, God possesses three kinds of children in Christians, Jews and heathen. The decision of rank for the children of the house rests only with the father. The order of Knights Templars favored these liberal views and even the foremost thinkers among the Jews believed that Judaism and Christianity were two true religions coming from God and that neither was tainted with deceit. One of their wise rabbis (it must have originated in the eastern country which is so full of metaphorical language) has clothed this thought in a parable, afterwards known as the parable of the rings. About the year 1100 a Spanish Jew put it in its earliest and simplest Jewish form. It states that Pedro of Arragon once asked a rich Jew, who had the reputation of great wisdom, which of the two laws (Mosaic or Christian) he considered the better, in order to have an excuse for appropriating his money, no matter which way he might answer the question. The Jew took three days' time for thought, at the end of which he came back to the king in apparent confusion and related the following incident. A month ago his neighbor, a jeweler, on the point of making a long journey, comforted his two sons by giving each a precious stone. This morning they had asked him, the Jew, about the worth of the two treasures, and, on his explanation that they must wait for the return of the father who alone was competent to decide the question, they had abused him and beaten him. Pedro said that this mean conduct of the sons deserved punishment. "Let thy ear hear what thy mouth speaks," replied the Jew. "The brothers Esau and Jacob have each a precious stone, and, if you wish to know who has the better, send a messenger to the great jeweler above who alone knows the difference." Pedro, satisfied with the answer, sent the Jew away in peace.

Between this simplest parable of the precious stones and the richest in every way (Lessing's version in *Nathan*) many members and variations appear, full of pride of faith and spiritual freedom, of exclusive confidence and unsparing skepticism, of universal love of man and narrow hate. The

moral lesson contained in all these different versions is the "teaching of brotherly love, humanity, and mutual tolerance."—which forms the essence and basis of the Christian religion. And this is the same lesson which Lessing had been trying to teach in his controversy with Goeze, in the *Education of the Human Race*, and the other writings of that period, so that *Nathan* only embodies in poetic form what he had already said elsewhere. In Spain, probably, a third religion was added, the Moorish. The indecision remains, but the early Christian transformation clouded the clearness of the Spanish-Jewish anecdote. According to Wünsche (*Origin of the Parable of the Three Rings*) the next earliest account is found in the *Cento Novelle antiche*, a well-known collection of Italian stories. In number 72 is the parable of the rings which is nearly like the Arragonian, but we have here a Sultan and three rings, one genuine and two false, the father alone knowing the true one. From here the story passed into the *Gesta Romanorum* where in one of its three versions we have one additional trait which Lessing has made use of. Here the true ring has the power of making its wearer beloved by God and man. Whether Busone da Gubbio (1311) in his novel *Avventuroso Siciliano* took his version of the parable from the *Cento Novelle* or elsewhere is still doubtful, but it is certain that Boccaccio drew from him. Busone made but few changes: only one ring is genuine, but it is not left to the father to decide which religion is the true one, that still remains undecided. With Boccaccio it is no longer an indefinite sultan, but the warlike and heroic Saladin who in his need of money calls the rich and usurious Jew Melchisedec from Alexandria to Jerusalem in order to force a loan from him by means of the vexatious question which of the three religions he considers the true one. The Jew is soon resolved and recounts to Saladin as if by sudden inspiration the story of the three rings. This is essentially the same as that given in *Nathan*, Act 3, sc. 7, to which we refer the reader. The story of Boccaccio varies very little from the

other Italian accounts. He does not tell us, as the others did, for what purpose the sultan needed money. Busone also gives the reason why the sultan seeks to rob the Jew. Jews are hated, therefore they can conscientiously be robbed of their money. For the tolerant Boccaccio this was wrong, so he changes his Jew into a rich, avaricious usurer instead of leaving him a noble and wise person.

Lessing has made several changes. Besides the fact that the ring has been received from "dear hands" it has the power of making its wearer, who should have confidence in its virtue, well-pleasing before God and man. In order to prevent the son who should possess the ring from alone becoming the head and prince of the house, the father had two others made so like the original that he could not distinguish the true from the false. Rejoicing that he could now show each of his sons the same marks of love, he calls each one to him separately and gives each of them a blessing and the ring. After the father's death there arose the same controversy about the genuine ring as in the other versions, and the judge before whom all appeared could give no verdict. Boccaccio closes with the remark: "Each of the three nations believes its religion to be the real, divine revelation; but which has the true one can no more be decided than which is the true ring." Lessing does not stop there. After the judge has dismissed the three wrangling sons from his tribunal on account of lack of proof to form any decision, it occurs to him that there is a key to this seeming riddle. The true ring possesses a magic virtue which cannot fail to manifest itself in the one who has it and wears it in this confidence. As none of the three possesses the power to make himself beloved by the others, so none has the true ring; this must be lost and those they have are false; the father would not bear the tyranny of one ring any longer in his house; each may now think he has the true one, and let each strive to show the virtue of his ring.

The magic virtue is the moral effect of religion. When the judge asked the sons to help the virtue of the ring by meek-

ness, by hearty docility, by well-doing, by inner resignation to the will of God, he shows that these virtues are the moral effects of religion meant by the magic virtue of the ring. In them, and not in the outer, historical symbols and rites, lies the infallible proof of the truth of religion. That religion is the true one which produces the best men. Whether Islamism, Judaism, or Christianity is best adapted to effect this result Lessing does not say, but only implies that it is not impossible in all three. We cannot, however, deny that the way in which the principal character of the drama throws doubt on every positive religion which lays claim to objective truth has something dazzling for the great mass of mankind. It would almost appear as if the story in its comprehensive, graceful form, was well suited to spread that enlightenment which desires to resolve religion into complete agnosticism. The story is highly poetical, however, and does not completely conform to the real thought. Whether only two of the possessors of the rings, or, as the judge seems to think, all three have been deceived, cannot be decided under the circumstances. But this is only a story intended to inculcate a truth and must be judged as the parables of the Lord. As parables they may be excellent, even for the special purpose used, but if taken as truths they may be complete or incomplete, true or false in themselves, though quite proper to exemplify the truth which the one employing them wished to teach. The three religions are in so far distinguished from one another that in two of them, Islamism and Judaism, there is a difference between the objective truth sought for and the truth actually revealed, while in Christianity, where the divine and human have become thoroughly united, the truth sought in all religions is really revealed. It cannot be expected that Nathan, who, according to his own confession, does not wish to give the truth as such, but rather by means of the story which he tells the sultan thinks himself dispensed from the solution of the problem, will really state the principle which distinguishes the truth of the three religions and their relation to one another.

When Saladin objects that the religions named by him can be distinguished from one another, Nathan replies that they are all based on tradition and history, and adds that it is quite natural that we all, Muhammedans, Jews, Christians, should doubt least of all the words of those whose blood flows in our veins, of those who have given us proof of their love from our childhood.

This mode of reasoning is truly such that the conscience, which does not enter into the inner reasons upon which real knowledge rests, is satisfied. But it does not enter into the greater, profounder depths of the question where knowledge alone can guide. It is true that all religions with any real life to them have an historical background and that children accept the religion of their fathers as something from those who are nearest and dearest to them. But this is only belief founded on authority and is to be distinguished from the real religious belief founded on more perfect knowledge and the inner witness of the spirit. This is why Lessing insists on the fact that the truth of religion is to be recognized in itself, in its inner characteristics, thus rising to an ideal sphere to which Nathan does not attain. While denying that for him who would gain the knowledge, the characteristics of the truth are already present in the three religions, Nathan gives voice to the sentiment that it is the moral life, love, through which the truth of our inherited religion manifests itself. The manner in which the owners of the three rings quarrel with one another tends to show us that that miraculous force inherent in the true religion is active in none of the three religions whose symbols are the rings. Hence they are urged to emulate this love, so that perhaps later the truth might be revealed to their descendants. This love we know is the touchstone of real religion. But Nathan makes it the property of the Muhammedan, Jewish and Christian religions, when it belongs to the Christian alone. For religions of law only gain the full truth through love which is the origin of law and the essence of the moral world; even all Christians who wish to enter into the

kingdom of God must emulate this love. Christ taught it here on earth and has left it as a legacy to us. No one, however, can say that this love has been revealed to, and become the real motive of, the moral life in Judaism and Islamism, which are both national religions and neither knew nor had received any revelation of the love that absolves man from error and sin.

Having announced the doctrine of love in the story, the poet shows the moral force springing from pure love in his *denouement*. Characters separated by nationality, but obeying the purely human feelings, appear before us at the close of the drama in a real union. The powerful sultan Saladin, Nathan the rich Jew living in Jerusalem, a German Templar, prisoner of the Saracens, Sittah, Daja, Recha, are drawn to one another by similar sentiments, and the ties of blood and the benevolence of the Jew seal the bond. As in nature night yields to the rising sun, so here delusion and hate disappear from the consciences of men as soon as love appears. Oriental and Occidental, Muhammedan, Jew, Christian, rise above particular interests, feel drawn to one another as man to man, even love one another as members of one family. This is the same high standard that we saw in the *Education of the Human Race* and in *Ernst and Falk*. The conclusion of *Nathan*, moreover, is intended to let us see, imperfectly to be sure, the realization of that ideal claimed only for the future in the two articles. These characters have advanced far enough to accept the new eternal gospel. But this makes them true Christians in whose religion alone all the conditions for such a development are found.

Besides the novel in the *Decamerone* of Boccaccio already mentioned two others have an important bearing on the plot of our drama. The family history, some features in Nathan himself, and, in a certain measure, the character of the Templar are undoubtedly due to Lessing's study of this Italian author. The story related in Giorn. v, v, throws light on the family relations of our characters. It is an account of a lost child

like Recha who is reared by a kind-hearted old gentleman, Giacomino, as his own daughter. Here, however, two young men fall in love with her, one of whom turns out to be her brother and the other marries her. All the features of the Templar and Recha are present. The two servants are combined in Daja, and Bernabuccio, the father of the lost girl, is Wolf von Filneck, the father of the Templar and Recha. The lovely characteristic of Boccaccio's Giacomino, "who in his time had experienced much, who was a good-natured man, has passed over to Nathan, while the violent impetuosity of Giannole, the brother, is reflected in the Templar."

But Lessing is still further indebted to Boccaccio, *Giorn. x, Nov. III.* Here we have a man named Nathan who is exceedingly wealthy, benevolent, hospitable, of noble sentiments, giving thirty-two times to the same beggar woman without letting her see that she is recognized by him, going about in modest attire. Calm and composed when a rival in wealth and goodness comes and tells him that he is going to kill him because he outdoes him in goodness and benevolence, prudent, noble-minded and self-denying in every way. Had he talked and been a Jew he would have been Lessing's Nathan. How much the Nathan in the Novel reminds of the Nathan in the drama and yet how skilfully Lessing has transformed and remodelled his characters to suit his own idea to be represented in his drama! For the trend, the idea of the drama is profounder, more consistent, more according to the dictates of reason than any Boccaccio ever even imagined.

Boccaccio was, however, not the only source of Lessing's drama, say some critics. That absurd story that Dean Swift and Esther Johnson, or Stella, were both the natural children of Sir William Temple, the English Diplomatist and Political writer, is cited as a source. Moreover Swift wrote the *Tale of a Tub*, a parabolical comparison of the three confessions, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Calvinism, showing that all three had departed so far from the true spirit of Christianity that there was no more life in any of them.

The parable of the three rings is certainly more elevated than that of the *Tale of a Tub*, though there is a certain resemblance in the subject-matter and trend of the latter to the drama. Lessing was well acquainted with this story and also with Swift's work. But Caro (p. 74 ff.) probably goes too far when he says that Lessing here found that inner association of ideas so necessary for the unity of his drama. For there is no more inner connection between the *Tale of a Tub* and Swift's supposed love to a sister (then considered true, but now known to be false) than there is between the three novels of Boccaccio (Giorn. x, III; Giorn. v, v, I, III). For inner connection is not a personal element, but a natural cause and effect. The complete idea contained in *Nathan* had long been lying in the poet's mind; its external form was a mere secondary thought which Boccaccio's novels were as likely, and more so, to put into definite shape as Swift's story and work.

Caro's conceit that the name of Swift's supposed father, "Temple," led Lessing to call the sister's brother a Templar is a clever one, but has no force. For the historical background naturally brought the Templars into action and it was only to be expected that they would play a prominent part in the drama. It may be possible that the Swift incident had an unconscious influence upon Lessing. For when Voltaire returned from England, he brought the *Tale of a Tub* with him, asserting that this notorious *Tale of a Tub* was an imitation of the three undistinguishable rings which the father left to his three children; and we know that Lessing was an ardent admirer of Voltaire. But no one now concedes that it was the veritable source; for Boccaccio stood nearer in thought to the poet's idea than the Swift source.

It is remarkable with what masterly skill Lessing has acquired the very spirit of the Orient. The best Oriental scholars could not do better. Only the East produces such remarkable examples of generosity and liberality; here it is

a religious virtue to give. Parabolic teaching, generally in the open air, is another peculiarity of the eastern nations and Lessing has made free use of it. Nathan is master of this art and Recha is his worthy pupil. Notice also that the catastrophe of the piece is brought about by a parable. The style is simple, natural, and original. Each character uses the language peculiarly suited to it and it changes to suit the scene. Not unfrequently Lessing went into the street, as it were, and picked up most expressive phrases and legalized their use by adopting them.

Had Lessing wished to employ dramatic poetry to represent certain general phenomena of the psychological life he could have chosen no better locality or time for his purpose than Palestine during the third crusade. The East and West met here and Palestine formed the center of all the historical life of the time. Richard the Lion-hearted of England, Philip Augustus of France, Leopold of Austria, the most powerful rulers of the West, accompanied by the greatest and noblest vassals of their kingdoms, the king of Jerusalem with his barons, the bloom of knighthood in the priestly orders of the Templars and Knights of Malta, and a high clergy; Saladin, the victorious warrior of the East, who ruled from the Nile to the Euphrates and Tigris with his Emirs and Pashas. Intermingled with these were the clever merchants from the great commercial cities of the Mediterranean; Jews, experienced and educated by their journeyings in all lands, so that, as Lessing says (3, 10) "all the world flocks together here." This congregation of all mankind in a friendly and hostile manner must necessarily have exerted a peculiar influence upon the general culture, must have produced a peculiar sentiment and intellectual development, must have made a peculiar impression upon the views taken of the whole world and of life by the more enlightened individuals, especially upon the religious views, as well of the Jews as of the Christians and Mussulmans. Boccaccio had placed his Jew in Alexandria and had him called to Saladin. For his place of action Lessing chose

Jerusalem at a time when Saladin had captured the holy city from the crusaders. Here had assembled that people for worship which called itself the chosen people of God. Christ, by his glorious death on the cross, had made the city sacred and had promulgated a universal religion. But during the Middle Ages Jerusalem became the seat of the fanatical rage of both Christians and Muhammedans who there committed execrable deeds of violence and blood. The spirit of humanity displayed by noble men formed a striking contrast with most frightful intolerance, and thus set off the truths announced by our drama; this very contrast makes the ideal part of our poem more real and the real part more ideal. Lessing wished to exhibit the evils of religious fanaticism and the reign of Saladin was best suited for that. Time and place were admirably adapted to bring the representation of the three religions into close connection. For at this time the spirit of adventure reigned supreme and the air was full of strange incidents and curious events.

From the historical allusions in the play the exact time, as near as that can be determined, was probably between the first of September, 1192, and the fifth of March, 1193, that is after the conclusion of the truce with Richard the Lion-hearted and before the death of Saladin. And though Lessing paid no great attention to strict chronological order, "he still contrives to bring before us a vivid historical picture, and the local coloring is produced in a truly masterly manner."

As *Nathan the Wise* represents the conflict of tolerance with prejudice, we can on this principle divide the characters into certain groups. Nathan, Saladin and the Templar represent the cosmopolitan and humanitarian idea, while the Patriarch, and in a certain degree, Daja also, stands for narrow-mindedness and intolerance. The cloisterbrother and Al Hafi have a leaning to nature-life and are representatives of noble Naturalism. Nathan himself naturally leads the first group. Lessing is said to have glorified in him, his life-long friend, Moses Mendelssohn, but there is not a single trait in Nathan bearing

any resemblance whatever to Moses Mendelssohn. Most of the features are taken from Melchisedec and that Nathan of Boccaccio already mentioned, though they have been idealized. We have shown above why a Jew was chosen to represent this his greatest character in the drama. Nathan possesses endurance, wisdom, calmness, and affability, and is above all narrowness of nationality and religious difference. As merchant he has visited many lands and gathered experience as well as gold. He is generous and benevolent towards all. The true religion for him is the one which teaches love to God and man, gentleness, tolerance, and right-doing ; for him tolerance is not a mere inclination, a mere pastime, but an inner wish, character, the man. He is in every way the opposite to Shakespeare's Shylock, and is in fact the possessor of the true ring in that he understands how to make himself well-pleasing to God and man. He is an ideal character, the embodiment of an idea, Lessing's idea of true manhood ; in this respect we could with greater justice say that Lessing himself, rather than his friend, is his own prototype for his Nathan, though this would be aside from the truth. And yet we have something of the Jew in Nathan ; the cunning observable in his dealings with his fellow-men, his deference to others in order to attain his ends, which indeed are always the purest and noblest, a fondness for metaphor and parable, which are all Oriental-Jewish traits. He is the ideal hero who has undergone struggles that excite our interest, and we cannot help loving and honoring him.

Next to Nathan stands Saladin, not the historic warrior, but the man in his family relations with a nature more adapted to action than to contemplation. The historic Saladin was a strict Mussulman who looked upon war against the Crusaders as his life-mission. For these his natural foes he cherished an implacable hatred. He was ever true to his word, ever kept faith with the Christians though they betrayed him again and again. Brave and intrepid by nature he was yet a peace-loving man who rose

above his environments and showed himself magnanimous alike to friend and foe. His self-abnegation was great, for at the height of power he felt no desire for mere show and magnificence, but was plain and simple in his daily life. Boccaccio had already made him a traditional hero and the Middle Ages crowned him with a halo of glory. But little was left for Lessing to do. He has idealized in him imperial greatness, noble sentiments, magnanimity and liberality. For he looks upon nobility as something akin to himself, therefore the genuine disinterestedness of the Dervish, the profound wisdom of Nathan, the knightly heroism of Richard the Lion-hearted create no envy, no malice, no surprise in him ; for they seem to him only natural. In fact he would have been more surprised at their absence.

Sittah, the sister of Saladin, serves the poet as a foil to set off the excellent qualities of her brother. She is not so tolerant as he and perhaps for that very reason sees Christians and Jews in a truer light, though not unmixed with prejudice. She accuses the Christians of intolerance and a departure from the pure doctrine of their founder. Nor are the Jews less repugnant to her, not so much on account of their pride in their faith as for their avarice and cowardice. It is she who contrives the plan to catch the Jew ; it is she who has Recha brought to the palace so that the Jew could not possibly spirit her away from the Templar. She shows the natural curiosity of the human race in trying to pry into the secret conversation between her brother and Nathan, and in wishing to see Recha whom the Templar loves. She takes an important part in the action of the drama, especially in the intrigues. She loves her brother above all things and forms in various ways his complement. He sees things on a grand scale, she in miniature, hence she is often more accurate in her knowledge of men than he. Where one is weak the other is strong, where he is lavish she is economical. Prudence and cunning are her virtues and we miss in her the individual truth of

a real poetic character. Like her brother she is historical, though history barely mentions her.

By birth and name only does the Templar appear as a Christian. The child of Saladin's brother Assad and a Stauffen lady who had gone on the Crusades, brought up by his uncle who was a templar, aroused to action by the latter's tales and the information that his father was an Oriental who had returned home with his mother, he enlists in the Crusades in the order of the Templars, though little convinced of the truth of Christianity. The contradictions in his character are so striking that it will require much reflection to bring the special features into harmony. The predominant trait is the vein of deep melancholy which gives a serious earnestness to his every act. The disharmony in his character and his discontent spring partly from his early training and partly from his recent experiences among the Templars, as Christian and as prisoner in the hands of Saladin. He represents the transition state on his passage from a belief in a positive religion through disbelief to Lessing's third stage, to Nathan's standard. He has found that no one belief is infallible, but has not yet discovered that there is always wheat in the chaff, none so bad as to be utterly condemned. At the very end of the drama he still appears distrustful and has to pass through a struggle to renounce his passionate love and accept Recha as sister. Even then the disharmony fermenting in his inner and outer life is but slowly removed. However, as a member of the house of Saladin, when his dreams had become more than dreams, he at last saw life in its true light. His striking physical resemblance to Assad, his father, is deepened by his striking resemblance in all the qualities of his character. Nathan represents wise old age, Saladin matured manhood, Curd (the Templar) immature youth, which, like fresh *must*, must ferment and foam and by long fermentation become purified.

The most fragrant flower of the whole poem is Recha. In her simple, cheerful nature all the virtues of a maiden's pure

heart blossom. How tenderly she loves her father, what thankful love she bears for Daja! Many features of Recha are taken from Malchen König, Lessing's stepdaughter, who had a deep love for her stepfather and who was educated by him as carefully as Recha by Nathan. The latter is what Nathan made of her a susceptible and pure soul which a wise and just education has taught self-abnegation and love. She lived in her father; he was her world, her faith, her home. She is tender without being weakly, sentimental, intellectual and cultivated without being a bluestocking. Nathan, however, is not her only instructor. Daja, the Christian widow, the nurse, planted many seeds in her receptive mind and they also brought forth fruit of another kind. On the one hand we find philosophy and reason, on the other wild fancy and belief in angels, legends, the fanciful side of life. She belongs to the poetic figures of the German literature, whose presence can be felt rather than described. Like Goethe's Mignon in *Wilhelm Meister* and Schiller's Thekla in *Wallenstein* she is a concrete though idealized form of flesh and blood. But nevertheless she is as it were surrounded by a glamour and seems to us a friendly fairy form which enchants us all the more. Rarely do we catch glimpses of such beings in the world's literature and yet Germany has given us three, Recha, Mignon, Thekla. As sister of the Templar and niece of Saladin, adopted and brought up by Nathan, she forms a convenient center about which all the separate interests of race and religion converge, being of, and yet belonging exclusively to, neither of the three races or religions.

Of our second group, the Patriarch naturally stands at the head and is an excellent pattern of priestly thirst for power; he has also departed farthest from the doctrines which Christ came on earth to preach, not having the least trace of that meekness and gentleness which forms an essential element of a Christian character. He enjoys life in the fullest, but believes in the dogmatic infallibility of the Church. It has been said that Pastor Goeze, Lessing's bitter opponent in his contro-

versy occasioned by the publication of the fragments, is intended to be represented by the Patriarch, but nothing could be farther from the mark. There may be a few thrusts at Goeze, but the character as a whole is far different, too opposite to be modelled after him. It is the portrait of what a true Christian should not be. Instead of self-abnegation we have self-aggrandizement with all its worldly lusts. No feeling of humanity reigns in his breast. While demanding blind submission from others he seeks to draw profit from everything. Faith is for him a subservient means of power, a pliant tool for satisfying his ambition to rule. Though by nature intolerant and fanatical he is himself only a too willing subject, yielding servilely to every dangerous power, even when it is repugnant to him; creeping where he thinks it will advance his interests.

The character is historical. At the time when Saladin captured Jerusalem the reigning Patriarch was Heraclius. Of course he was sent away with the other Christians instead of remaining in the city as represented in our drama, but Lessing ever changed facts to suit his purpose. This Heraclius was a notorious character and very much worse than Lessing has painted him in the drama. He thinks of everything else rather than of the welfare of the souls entrusted to him. He was a politician of the worst stamp. Treason and murder are not only legitimate means with him, but become a duty when the priest says that it is for the honor of God. It was no matter to him how kind the Jew may have been to his adopted daughter Recha; if he had taught her no dogma nor positive religion, then he must burn at the stake. Rather a false belief than no belief. He will show how dangerous it is to the state when anyone may have no belief. So preached Goeze in the controversy. He is a priest, an ecclesiastical prince, but not a Christian. He represents rather the office of High Priest, or Egyptian Hierophant, or the priests of the Middle Ages, who have mostly been opponents of humanity and pure religion. He is "a bigot in whose eyes the interests of humanity are overshadowed, or rather extinguished, by those of his Church and

hierarchy." Without this character Lessing could not have done justice to the fundamental idea of his poem. We understand the power of a moral principle best when we "see not only men whose lives it sways, but men who are controlled by its opposite." He takes but little part in the play, though serving to bring out this fundamental idea. Fr. Theo. Vischer (*Aesth.* III, 1, 430) says: "The Patriarch should have gone to extremes, the Templar should have appeared at the most exciting moment of the danger to rescue Nathan and thus have completed his elevation above the darkness of prejudice; then the drama might have ended well, only not in the discovery that the lovers were brother and sister." But this would have been contrary to the whole tone of the drama which is intended to show true tolerance triumphing over intolerance and arrogance by quiet, peaceful means.

In Daja we have an example of *sancta simplicitas*, that narrow piety which becomes dangerous in cunning hands. Firm in her belief she overlooks the genuine kernel of religion in the form which excites her imagination and produces the frenzy of fanaticism. She is the widow of a noble squire, a Swiss, who was drowned with the emperor Frederick Barbarossa on the 10th of June, 1190. Nathan took her as companion to Recha, probably because the old nurse had sickened. Soon after Daja's arrival the latter died, but not before she had disclosed the secret of Recha's birth, though it is a mystery where the nurse could have found it out. According to this account Daja could not have been more than a year in the house of Nathan when our drama opens; and yet the references to her indicate a longer service in Nathan's family. There is no way of reconciling these discrepancies without assuming that Lessing intended to discard the old nurse and make Daja's service with him extend over the whole eighteen years of Recha's life, or else he forgot to distinguish between the two persons and applied words to Daja which belonged to the nurse.

Anxious for the welfare of her foster-child's soul she is constantly urging Nathan to make good his great sin of keeping his daughter from the true faith. She does not consider what a noble woman Recha has become under the instruction of Nathan ; she only sees a Christian child in the hands of a Jew. Nathan had been led to his high standard of faith by the loss of his family, had blessed the chance which had brought him Recha as a charge, and now the intrigues of the well-intentioned Daja were to put to the truest test what reason and long contemplation had ripened in his mind and made a part of his being. One object of the drama is to show us principles in action ; and thus Daja in a sense becomes the motive principle in it, as she by intrigue, by confusing the Templar, and arousing his dormant distrust and setting in action his impetuous nature, applies the power that moves the whole action. She plays also the effective part of an exquisitely comical dueña, and " could ill be spared in the economy of the drama."

In the naturalistic group we have two characters which show different phases of that simple, natural worship of God. The cloisterbrother came to the East as squire, but after serving many masters he finally left the tumult of war for the cloister, devoting himself entirely to the worship of God, to which his pious nature inclined him. Robbed and taken prisoner by Arabian marauders, he managed to escape and fled to Jerusalem into the cloister of the Patriarch who promised him the first free hermit's cell on Mt. Tabor. Everything unworthy or wrong was repugnant to his upright soul. Though ever obedient to his oath, he realizes that there are bounds to his obedience, and he keeps back the knowledge that Nathan has a Christian child. What he really lacks is the knowledge of the world which makes one live and work for his own and others' good. Like the Dervish his leaning is to naturalism which drives him out of the world ; but the Dervish easily gives himself up to pure contemplation ; with the latter it is pure, simple, joyous

renunciation in which the soul feels the full force of its freedom from worldly care while with the former it is chiefly humility and the feeling that he is too weak to cope with the complex difficulties of the world. Instead of self-abnegation we find self-disparagement, though he is by no means stupid and knows how to carry out the dishonest commands so honestly that they never do any harm. He sees a brother in everybody and represents the Publican in Christ's parable while the Patriarch represents the Pharisee; in the parable of the Good Samaritan he represents the Good Samaritan and the Patriarch the priest and levite. He is one of the poor in spirit to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs. By some he is called the true representative of Christianity in the drama and probably comes nearer the standard than any of the other representatives. He certainly has childlike simplicity, and all the qualities which go to make up a true Christian character. It is one of the most lovely personages Lessing has sketched for us; and yet the childlike simplicity, the childlike cunning forms a comical contrast to the priestly, Jesuitical Patriarch.

The Dervish is so little an adherent of the doctrine of Muhammed that he has been a follower of the Parsees. He appears to us as the son of pure, unmixt nature, which, as it is manifested in this character, forms a remarkable contrast to those artificial relations on which the social system actually rests. In the awkward cynic, Al Hafi, Lessing's friends recognize the free copy of a Berlin eccentricity, Abram Wulff, the secretary of Aaron Meyer. He was considered the greatest mathematical genius of the day, who, however, had no idea of the world and its relations. He was also an excellent chess-player and this characteristic has been skilfully brought out in the drama. Lessing had great respect for him on account of his piety and natural cynicism. The temptation was too great; he was introduced into the drama in the person of the Dervish as the unfortunate treasurer and chess-critic where he cuts a most wonderful figure. He has free entrance to his

friend Nathan's house, and preaches undisturbed his principles of cynic philosophy in grotesque words. The name is well chosen, Al Hafi, "The Barefooted," which Lessing found in his study of Oriental life and customs. Here, also, he found those proverbial sayings on everyday life, morality and wit, which he puts into Al Hafi's mouth.

In the Dervish we have the view of the elegiast of the eighteenth century, "a true man must be far from men." Our Dervish longs for the Utopian ideal of an unadulterated condition of innocence and primitive nature. The modern Frenchman or the German catches this shadowy something on the Alps or in the still valley ; but our light and barefooted Dervish seeks to find salvation among the naturalistic Parsees in the hot sands of the desert where the Ghebres dwell as pure beings of nature and serve God. Hence his cry : "On the Ganges, on the Ganges only do we find men."

SYLVESTER PRIMER.